

The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education
Testimony by Mary L. Fifield, President of Bunker Hill Community College
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Good Morning, Chairman Miller and members of the Commission. My name is Mary Fifield and I am President of Bunker Hill Community College here in Boston. I am honored to present remarks and recommendations today on behalf of the American Association of Community Colleges as well as my own community college, as part of this national dialog on higher education.

Community colleges are a uniquely American invention. From their start as junior colleges in the early 1900s, these two-year institutions signaled a dramatic change that expanded educational opportunity from the affluent to the poorest and most disadvantaged among us. With the basic philosophy that everyone deserves the chance to go to college, immediately following World War II two-year colleges proliferated and made real the Truman Commission's concept of a community college geographically accessible to all.

Today there are more than 1,150 community colleges across this great country that enroll almost half of all students who go to college. We train students for high demand jobs; we educate for transfer to baccalaureate degree-granting institutions; we help the unprepared get ready for college level academic programs; we teach English as a Second Language and basic literacy skills; we introduce international students to the American system of higher education; we provide valuable community service offerings to support business and civic interests; and we forge multiple partnerships with K-12 schools. In short, we aspire to, and in many cases meet, the total postsecondary needs of our population, as the Truman Commission envisioned.

Our institutions attract a greater diversity of students than any other sector of higher education. Consider that in community colleges about two-thirds of all students are part-time compared to about a quarter of students in baccalaureate degree-granting institutions. Fifty-four percent work fulltime, 34 percent have dependents, 16 percent are single parents, and 23 percent spend six to 20 hours a week commuting to their college classes. More than 45 percent of community college enrollees are first generation college students and almost 44 percent of community college students are 25 or older.

As Kay McClenney observes in an essay titled, *Keeping America's Promise: Challenges for Community Colleges*, "...going to college is not what it used to be...that is an 18 year old leaving home to live on or near a campus, attending classes full-time and typically earning the degree four years later where she or he started". In fact, the terms traditional and nontraditional students have undergone a role reversal of sorts. For a good part of mainstream America, a nontraditional student is now the norm.

It is within this context of a changed definition of college student that I present the following issues and recommendations as they pertain to affordability, access, accountability and quality of our nation's higher education system, and particularly as these issues affect the more than 12 million students who attend community colleges annually.

Affordability

Issue

State support for higher education continues to be viewed as discretionary and fluctuates greatly with the economic health of a given state. Budget cuts or stagnating funding results in higher student tuitions; these in turn limit access, especially for the many low income students who attend community colleges.

Recommendation

Provide federal incentives to state and local governments to establish a sustained funding policy to provide adequate appropriations to public higher education institutions.

Issue

According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS), more than 12 percent of the population lives below the poverty line...nearly 34 million people. These and other low income people have a little more than a 20 percent chance of going to college. For African-Americans and Latinos the percentage is lower. For low income students, the availability of financial aid becomes the deciding factor affecting college attendance. Yet increasingly, both static amounts of aid, such as the four year freeze of Pell Grants, and the policies governing eligibility of grants, such as the new Academic Competitiveness Grant, serve as disincentives to low-income students. Further, federal programs designed to provide pathways from high school to college, especially important to populations unaccustomed to considering college as an option, are underfunded or slated for elimination, as evidenced by the FY2007 budget that deletes programs such as GEAR UP, Upward Bound and Talent Search.

Recommendations

Break the four year freeze on funding for Pell Grants. Create Pell Grant eligibility for stand-alone ESL programs. Revise policies governing Pell Grants so that grants for college are committed to students while they are still in middle and high school (the latter recommendation is a BHCC proposal only).

Establish a sustained commitment to fund pre-college enrichment programs such as GEAR UP, Upward Bound and Talent Search.

Provide incentives for dual enrollment programs to give high school students early familiarity with a college environment.

Expand eligibility for the Academic Competitiveness Grant from exclusively full-time enrollment to include the two-thirds of community college students who are part-time.

Issue

Increasingly, federal grant opportunities for students are shifting from need-based to more exclusionary merit-based aid, while need-based aid such as Pell decreases in real value. The new Academic Competitiveness Grants, for instance, require recipients to complete “a rigorous high school program.” Many low income students don’t have the option of selecting their high school and could be ineligible for this aid through no fault of their own. Similarly, the proposed PACE Act provides four year competitive scholarships to students who obtain bachelors’ degrees in the sciences, engineering or mathematics and concurrent certification as K-12 mathematics or science teachers. These merit-based funds are to be awarded “on the basis of national examinations”. In short, merit-based financial aid programs appear to help students who need financial assistance least.

Recommendation

Establish a federal policy that makes need-based grants the primary aid for low income students and expand need-based grant opportunities.

Issue

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) has not delivered on connecting business training needs to community colleges as providers of that training. WIA requirements work contrary to encouraging training participants. Further, under the Workforce Investment Act's customer-based system, federal training funds flow to community colleges primarily through the Individual Training Accounts controlled by Workforce Investment Act participants. These funds cover tuition and fees for the WIA participants, but not the other costs of developing and implementing training programs, which far exceed the tuition revenue generated.

Recommendation

WIA policies should be revised to encourage more training; One-Stop Career Centers should be authorized to assess WIA participants and immediately refer them for training. In addition, WIA should provide separate funding to support training program development.

Accessibility**Issue**

Federal adult basic education programs do not reflect the large scale of community college involvement in this area. Community colleges offer literacy training as well as English as a Second Language courses as prerequisites to enrollment in workforce education certificate and degree programs. Similarly, these courses are provided to employers on site.

Recommendation

Adult basic education should be explicitly linked to the workforce training mission of community colleges. Federal grants with a required match should be considered to motivate greater state and private investment in adult basic education and literacy training.

Issue

Passage of federal legislation to assist undocumented immigrant students to obtain a college education continues to face obstacles. Immigrants today account for one of every 20 employees in the workforce. Generally they occupy jobs in service and blue collar occupations. Lacking a college education, they are disproportionately located in these unskilled and low paying jobs. Many prospective college students who are immigrants have spent most of their lives in this country. They have been educated in our public schools. Prohibiting their access to public higher education results in a waste of talent and exacerbates the already alarming shortage of skilled workers in our nation.

Recommendation

Put postsecondary education within reach of undocumented immigrant students who have grown up and gone to high school in the United States by passing the DREAM Act. Federal (and state) financial aid should be made available to most categories of undocumented immigrant students; it is in the national interest to do so.

Accountability

Issue

In an effort to obtain more information about institutional activity, including graduation rates, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has explored a new information collection system in which data would be submitted by institutions on a student-by-student basis. Students' social security numbers or other identifiers would be used to match data files. The new system would include data on tuition and fees paid as well as individual loans and grants. Funds would need to be provided for the system.

Recommendation

This proposal has serious implications for student privacy and should be examined with skepticism. Use of individual social security numbers or other identifiers by colleges is dangerous due to the possibility of identity theft or other release of the data. Finally, we are not convinced of the argument for collecting individual data rather than aggregated institutional data as is currently the practice.

Issue

Since 1997, the standard measure of success for community colleges used by The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is based upon the number of first-time, full-time students who graduate within three years. Since the majority of community college students are part-time, these data capture only a fraction of our students. The data are further skewed by the fact that a significant number of the first time, full-time cohort transfer before graduation or cut back to part-time status due to family and job responsibilities. In both cases, these students are counted as failures and contribute to lowered completion rates for community colleges.

Recommendation

There needs to be recognition that community colleges are "open door" institutions enrolling a majority of part-time students with many and differing goals that may or may not include degree completion. Further, community college students differ in their degree of academic preparation and frequently need developmental education that prolongs their time to degree completion. In addition, many are low-income students with both family and job responsibilities that disrupt the continuity of their education. Public policy for measuring student success should incorporate multiple indicators and include learning outcomes; licensure exam pass rates; individual student goal attainment; transfer rates; employment success and results of surveys such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE).

Quality

Issue

For community college students who transfer, acceptance of credits by receiving institutions is critical to timely degree completion. Articulation agreements between individual community colleges and four-year institutions delineate transferability on a course-by-course or, sometimes, program-by-program basis. Nevertheless, the process is long, tedious and not always successful, causing students to lose credits already earned at community colleges.

Recommendation

Federal incentives should be provided to encourage states to develop systematic and comprehensive articulation policies and procedures.

Issue

The Science and Engineering Indicators 2006 Report underscores the need to improve and expand science and mathematics education from K-12 levels. This is both an issue of world competitiveness and emerging workforce requirements pertaining to science, mathematics, engineering and technology (STEM). Community colleges' roles include coursework for preparation of K-12 science and mathematics teachers as well as two-year degrees and certificates in these areas. Because more students are enrolled in community colleges than any other segment of higher education, it is imperative that community colleges be included in STEM initiatives.

Recommendation

Expand programs such as Tech Prep that introduce and interest high school students in STEM and link them explicitly to community college programs of study. Provide federal incentives for the development of STEM programs at community colleges as well as professional development opportunities in STEM fields for community college faculty.

Conclusion

The American Association of Community Colleges and American Association for State Colleges and Universities characterize community college students as "...the most vulnerable members of our society who already face significant financial and social challenges – low income, limited expectations and uneven preparation." Yet this is the real majority. This is the future of our country. This is the workforce of America who will make the difference between a prosperous economy and one that falters.

In a report issued by the Education Commission of the States Center for Community College Policy titled, *Closing The College Participation Gap – A National Summary*, author Sandra Ruppert offers what might well be the ultimate measure of accountability for federal public policy in higher education. I agree with Dr. Ruppert that "Ultimately, the goal to build a nation of learners will be measured in terms of how well the nation is able to educate those most difficult to reach." These are our community college students.

I appreciate the opportunity to address you today and look forward to your questions. Thank you.